EUROPEAN
POLICYBRIEF

GLOBAL RE-ORDERING: EVOLUTION THROUGH EUROPEAN NETWORKS

Levers for change:
the EU and civil society in the Eastern neighbourhood

ALIAKSANDR CHARNIAKOVICH
Junior researcher at FRIDE.

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Stability in its immediate neighbourhood is vital for European Union (EU) security. It depends on, among other factors, the quality of domestic governance in neighbouring countries including democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and civilian control over the security sector. The key challenge for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region – which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – is addressing state fragility, which opens the door to corruption, the abuse of power, weak institutions, lack of accountability, and organised crime. Regional stability is also threatened by the unresolved conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and over Transnistria in Moldova.

The EU's overarching strategic objective in its Eastern neighbourhood is to ensure a smooth democratic transition by promoting political and economic reform. The Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, includes both a normative dimension, based on extending EU values and norms, and a functionalist approach, which entails policy transfers and regulatory approximation to the EU acquis. The assumption is that incremental reforms will, over time, foster normative and political convergence around democratic principles and practice. But change cannot just be exported, it must come from within.

The emergence of a strong civil society is key to ensure the achievement of this objective. This paper addresses the relationship between the EU and civil society in the region, focusing on the perceptions of local actors of the EU's support to democratic reform and security in EaP countries. Local civil society plays an important role in improving transparency and accountability, both by explaining EU policies to a broader audience and by overseeing governments' reform efforts. Civil society actors in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus see the EU as playing three main roles: as a reference model and norm-setter, a mediator and enforcer of dialogue between local authorities and non-governmental stakeholders and as a capacity-builder for local organisations.

UNEVEN PROGRESS

The six EaP countries have different attitudes towards European integration. Georgia and Moldova have articulated a sustained pro-European narrative and shown willingness to implement the EU's reform agenda, although progress is slow and uneven across different sectors. Ukraine's stated goal of deepening relations with, and eventually joining, the EU has been called into question. The current government struggles to balance Russian and EU demands, while prioritising at home the interests of a ruling elite that would not benefit from self-imposed EU requirements on democracy and the rule of law. Armenia has shown a moderate drive towards 'Europeanisation' while valuing its security ties with Moscow, and has been struggling to reform its judicial sector and battle corruption. Azerbaijan and Belarus show the least inclination towards democratic reform. Belarus remains an authoritarian regime far from European standards of governance. In Azerbaijan, human rights are further backsliding as the energy-rich country seeks to talk to the EU on an equal basis and remains weary of reform prescriptions. This uneven approach to European rules and values translates into widely different levels of progress towards democratisation. It also affects the strength and effectiveness of civil society actors.

The EU has several mechanisms in place to support civil society activities in its neighbourhood as part of its broader reform agenda. Amongst the most notable initiatives is the establishment of the Civil Society Forum in 2009, where EU and EaP civil societies meet and organise themselves around several themes; and the creation in 2011 of a Civil Society Facility for Eastern and Southern neighbours. In addition, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and think tanks can seek funds through the Non-State Actors-Local Authorities in Development (NSA-LA) thematic programme, which is part of the EU's broader Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), as well as via the EU Instrument for Democracy and Human rights (EIDHR). The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) will soon be up and running, which might provide another source of funding for civil society initiatives in the European neighbourhood.

While knowledge of the existing instruments, programmes and funding opportunities is fairly evenly spread throughout the region, EaP civil societies' capacity to attract these funds and use them to have an impact on democratic change varies greatly. Most NGOs in the region are small and struggle to obtain EU funding. Familiar concerns include the complexity of application procedures, long assessment periods, complicated financial reporting and the need to obtain additional funds from other donors.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

In Georgia and Moldova, the EU's reform agenda largely meets civil society's expectations and is consistent with the government's official discourse, although practice often fails to match rhetoric. In these countries, as well as in Ukraine, civil society expects the EU to be more consistent and push harder for reform. In Azerbaijan and Belarus, civil society supports the EU's reform agenda, which receives little to no government endorsement. In these states, despite perceiving EU efforts positively, civil society criticises the Union's 'one-size-fits-all' approach and urges more tailor-made country-specific programmes.

Civil society in all EaP countries sees EU policies as an external framework with which their countries should comply. The framework of rules is not widely questioned and is regarded rather as a tool to reach EU standards in terms of good governance, efficiency, the rule of law and welfare. Overall, the EU is perceived as an external reform promoter. Relations with the EU in general are seen as a chance to foster positive change.

Given their reliance on the EU, civil societies in EaP countries are alert to the risk that EU political and security interests might dilute genuine reform objectives. Short-term stability and economic (energy) interests might sometimes override democracy support and engagement with civil society in countries that are not keen to reform. Azerbaijan, for example, is a country rich in natural resources, which plays an important role in EU energy security. There the European Union is seen to prioritise its energy interests by not pushing for democratic transition as long as the authoritarian regime is stable and cooperative. On the other hand, the EU takes a firmer stance and applies sanctions towards Belarus, which has limited energy resources, shows no sign of democratic reform or of improving its human rights record and only partly participates in the EaP's multilateral track.

In some countries like Belarus or Ukraine the EU is also seen as a mediator, whose role is to supervise or even enforce the dialogue between the authorities and civil society and to which civil society can appeal. In 2010, Ukrainian environmental NGOs complained to the EU that their government had neglected their views while drafting Ukraine's National Environmental Policy Strategy for 2020. As a response, the EU froze assistance to the state environmental agency and the conflict between NGOs and the ministry was overcome, at least temporarily. Also, Ukrainian civil society organisations clustered around the EaP Civil Society Forum regularly write open letters before official EU-Ukraine meetings, calling upon the EU to move forward with the Association Agreement while pushing Ukraine to stay in the course of reform. In October 2012, twelve prominent civic organisations and opposition movements in Belarus sent a joint letter to the EU asking the Union to support democratisation in Belarus and to call on the government to release political prisoners and stop repression.

This reliance on the EU as an enabler of dialogue with national authorities is in part due to the weakness of civil society across the region. Despite EU efforts in terms of capacity-building and structural support, local civil society organisations remain fragile and struggle to influence decision-makers or public opinion at large. The table below shows Freedom House rankings regarding the level of development and relative capacity of civil society in Eastern Europe, taking into account the different political environments. While there is marked deterioration in Azerbaijan and consistently very poor scores in Belarus, there are relatively stable patterns in the other EaP countries.

Civil society ratings in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus
(1 indicates the highest level of democratic progress, 7 the lowest).

	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine
2003	3.50	4.25	6.50	4	3.75	3.50
2008	3.50	5.25	6.50	3.50	3.75	2.75
2012	3.75	6	6	3.75	3.25	2.75

Figures from Nations in Transit annual reports (2003-2012), www.freedomhouse.org

The conflation of high expectations regarding the EU, local constraints and little progress in terms of civil society empowerment could end up challenging the EU's image as an effective agent of change. There is criticism over the limitations of the EU's conditionality-based approach in fostering viable reform-oriented policies in specific countries and in the region as a whole. Local civil society stakeholders wish to participate in the design of the EU's reform agenda regarding their countries, beyond performing as watchdogs over the implementation of relevant projects. The creation of the EaP Civil Society Forum was expected to address some of these issues and participants considered it as a positive experience in the first few years.

Furthermore, civil society in all six EaP countries considers the abolishment of the visa regime with the EU a key issue to boost support for reform. Visa liberalisation is regarded as a potential reform multiplier as it can show the benefits of establishing closer links with Europe and make these benefits more tangible. Border security is a closely linked and sensitive issue for the EU. The Union cooperates with its bordering states (Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine) on border management and has deployed Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions on the Moldova-Ukraine border and in Georgia. However, civil society actors stress that current cooperation on border management reform is mainly conducted at the technical level and that there is not enough focus on the political institutions charged with overseeing the security sector and the relevant mechanisms for civilian, parliamentary and judicial control. This results in opaque links between illicit cross-border activities and corruption in the agencies tasked with countering criminal networks. Whereas civil society organisations recognise the link between democratic development and security, there is only little direct EU engagement in security affairs under EaP instruments.

The two CSDP missions stand separate from EaP reform objectives and efforts. Besides, civil society organisations in neighbouring countries tend to be more engaged in social and political matters than in hard security issues. Thus, security sector reform – an area where democratic reform and hard security directly meet – is barely addressed. The EU attaches little attention to this domain and the governments in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus are reluctant to discuss these matters with the EU or with their own civil societies. For civil society actors in the region, the EU 'does democracy and economics', while NATO and, to a lesser extent, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) focus on security.

PROTRACTED CONFLICTS

The four protracted conflicts in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in Nagorno-Karabakh and in Moldova over Transnistria continue to threaten the Eastern neighbourhood's long-term stability. The prospect of European integration was expected to help reconciliation in Moldova and Georgia, and foster agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. After almost ten years of the ENP, there has been little to no movement in this direction. The August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia has made the reintegration of the breakaway regions unrealistic in the foreseeable future, and negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan (in which the EU plays no direct role) seem stuck. Transnistria has always been regarded as a less intractable conflict, but even a pro-European government in Moldova and a new, more moderate Transnistrian leadership have not engendered tangible progress.

EU support for engagement between civil societies from the conflicting sides has so far delivered limited results. Civil society actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan are mostly hesitant to cooperate, aside from a few exceptions such as the European Partnership for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (EPNK) project funded through the EU's Instrument for Stability. In Georgia, the memory of war is still fresh and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has complicated matters even further. For the EU it is highly problematic to support civil society cooperation involving NGOs from the non-recognised entities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia due to restricted access to these territories.

Research carried out under the Micro-level analysis of violent conflict project (Microcon, http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/projects/344_en.html) showed that, while welcoming EU support, civil society actors in countries that harbour protracted conflicts regard sustained political and diplomatic commitment critical to conflict resolution. High-level political pressure is indispensable to shift the structure of incentives of local elites, whose interests benefit from separatism and lingering tensions in conflict zones. Cultivating links with and among civil society can help mitigate such tensions and pave the way towards reconciliation, but conflicts need to be settled at a political level first.

CONCLUSION

Democracies need time to mature. Most important, it must be through both bottom-up civil society development and engagement and top-down government-led reforms. The EU plays an important external role at both levels. Progress is predicated on, among other factors, EaP civil societies fulfilling a linchpin role between the EU, local governments and the broader public. Civil society also performs an oversight function, seeking greater transparency and accountability while calling for more sustained consultation in shaping the reform agenda.

Civil society expects the EU to assist the governments of the region that are willing to democratise, establish the rule of law and support human rights, and to put pressure on reluctant regimes. But external support and conditionality cannot work without genuine demand from within. Engagement with local civil society is essential to ensure the emergence of a domestic constituency for change.

This also holds true for security sector reform in the region, where the EU must devote more attention and civil society should be more involved. With regard to the protracted conflicts, there remain substantial difficulties for the EU and local civil societies to engage in meaningful projects. Concrete progress on ending these conflicts largely depends on high-level political commitment and initiatives.

Lastly, concern remains within civil society that the EU might downplay values-based democracy promotion in favour of accommodating authoritarian regimes to meet its short-term interests. The clear message to the EU is that it should keep its democracy promotion, rights-oriented paradigm at the core of its approach. This is a critical condition to ensure not only successful reform, but also lasting stability in the region.

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COORDINATOR

Professor Shaun Breslin, The University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom.
E: shaun.breslin@warwick.ac.uk

CONSORTIUM

Universiteit van Amsterdam
Amsterdam, Netherlands

Boston University
Boston. United States of America

Université Libre de Bruxelles
Brussels, Belgium

University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa

Copenhagen Business School
Copenhagen, Denmark

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Oslo, Norway

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